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COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
Second session
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Agenda item 10

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON ITS SECOND SESSION

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Patrick M. CHIPUNGU

Chapter

(Agenda item 5)

REVIEW OF PROGRESS ON WATER-RELATED ISSUES: (a) REVIEW OF PROGRESS, CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITATIONS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF WATER-RELATED ISSUES (INCLUDING INPUTS FROM SPECIALIZED AGENCIES AND THE REGIONAL COMMISSIONS); (b) CONSIDERATION OF NEW INSTRUMENTS FOR GLOBAL ACTION

1. The Committee considered item 5 (a) of its agenda at the 1st meeting of its Working Group on Water Resources on 25 February 1994. It had before it the report of the Secretary-General on water resources: progress in the implementation of the Mar del Plata Action Plan and of Agenda 21 on water-related issues (E/C.7/1994/4). A representative of the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development introduced the report, which provided an overview of the interrelations between population, land and water resources. He noted that, whereas there had been a growing understanding of the finite and vulnerable nature of water resources and of the need for holistic approaches to land and water management, there was every reason to be concerned about the long-term sustainability of water resources development world wide. The question facing the Committee was whether, given the current state of affairs, the world was headed towards a water crisis of global proportions and what steps would need to be taken if such a crisis were to be averted.

The Committee identified the need to manage the resource at the lowest appropriate level, in accordance with the approaches taken at the International Conference on Water and the Environment (Dublin, 1992) and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992). The Committee was also of the opinion that if significant long-term progress were to be achieved, Governments and the international community needed to attach priority attention to the establishment of dynamic, interactive, iterative and multisectoral approaches to water resources management, as an essential precondition to the implementation of all other recommendations contained in chapter 18 of Agenda 21, 1/ and to the implementation of diagnostic assessments of their current institutional arrangements and human resources capacity, with a view to formulating strategies for the future.

2. The Committee commended the quality of the report prepared by the Secretariat and expressed its view that certain areas could be expanded to define more accurately the nature of the global water crisis.

3. Most experts agreed that an update on the current report would be needed for the third session of the Committee, possibly to be entitled "Twenty years after Mar del Plata". The importance of strategies for integrated water resources management and linkages between water and land issues were stressed. The report could be strengthened by requesting the regional commissions to prepare regional summaries and specific countries to prepare case-studies of successful strategies. Integrated approaches to water resources management should address ways to reduce institutional fragmentation and should not be limited to drinking water supply and sanitation. It was also suggested that the report might include a section from ECE on current developments in water-related issues in the transitional economies of Central and Eastern Europe.

4. The representative of ECE said that its Committee on Water Problems had recently completed a draft report which covered the water management situation in Europe's transitional economies. The report would be forwarded to the Secretariat, to be included in the update of the current document.

5. Several experts expressed the view that overextraction and pollution of groundwater were serious problems and that groundwater protection needed to be emphasized. Legislation and enforcement, combined with user participation, were required if groundwater were to be managed and protected effectively.

6. Another area that needed attention was the reclamation of irrigation areas rather than the opening up of new irrigation schemes. Planning had to balance the needs for agricultural and non-agricultural land use and alternative ways to raise agricultural production and irrigation efficiency. Water resources schemes of various sizes were needed to take into account environmental concerns and watershed management. The related problems of waterlogging and salinization of irrigated lands would have to be addressed. One expert emphasized the linkage between water and land use and proposed that attention be directed to the Commission on Sustainable Development's consideration of chapter 10 of Agenda 21 in that regard.

7. Several delegates stressed that prior assessment of resources was necessary before proper planning and management would be possible. Proper monitoring and

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follow-up would be required. One expert noted that massive financial support from external agencies would be required for such assessments.

8. A number of experts endorsed the final paragraph (para. 79) of the report and felt that its contents should be conveyed to the Economic and Social Council. They stressed the need for a multisectoral approach and for diagnostic assessment of the current institutional arrangements and human resources capacity at the national level as a basis for formulating strategies for the future.

9. Unless there were serious attempts to alleviate poverty, discussions of environmental degradation would be idle. It would be necessary to create mass awareness at the national and international levels of the water crisis and to take corrective action as a demonstration of the seriousness of the situation.

10. In considering agenda item 5 (b), at the 1st meeting of the Working Group on Water Resources on 25 February 1994, the Committee had before it the report of the Secretary-General on international instruments for global action (E/C.7/1994/5). The report was introduced by a representative of the Department for Development Support and Management Services, who provided an overview of the principal international instruments focusing on the relationship between water and the environment. She placed emphasis on some of the principles emanating from the Conference on Water and the Environment and on Agenda 21.

11. Several experts emphasized the importance of raising the level of international attention and action on the global water crisis through the establishment of some kind of legal instrument which might impart greater status to water issues. Discussions were held on what that might entail - i.e., a code of conduct, a water law, a framework convention, or a declaration of principles. It was generally believed that it would be more difficult to obtain agreement on a convention, which would be legally binding.

12. One expert felt that the focus for such an instrument should be integrated water management and the need for greater balance in water use.

13. Another expert stressed the need for a framework convention on the water cycle, focusing on linkages between water resources and land use, and the need to protect water resources from pollution.

14. The representative of ECE described in detail conventions established under ECE auspices, affirming that they had had a strong impact on the level of public awareness and on capacity-building, particularly for the economies in transition, which must establish new laws and infrastructures to strengthen water management. One expert suggested that the success of the ECE conventions might be related to the relatively high level of awareness in Europe of water issues.

15. The Committee encouraged ECE to provide information that could be incorporated into the report discussed in paragraph 3.

16. It was proposed by one expert that the Commission on Sustainable Development be requested to set up a task force to explore various options. It

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was confirmed that the Committee would be able to convey recommendations to the Commission on Sustainable Development in time for its session of May-June 1994.

Notes

1/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution II, annex II.
